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Local tobacco retailer checks expand to include e-cigarettes

Local tobacco retailer checks that are conducted to ensure that stores don't sell tobacco products to minors are expanding to include e-cigarettes, according to the Eau Claire City-County Health Department.

The change is being made through the statewide Wisconsin Wins program to address the rising popularity of e-cigarettes among adolescents and teens. Data from the 2014 National Youth Tobacco Survey shows that current e-cigarette use among middle and high school students tripled from 2013 to 2014. The results show that in only a few years of being on the market, youth use of e-cigarettes has now surpassed youth cigarette smoking. The 2014 Wisconsin Youth Tobacco Survey shows 7.9% of our state's high school students currently use e-cigarettes.

Electronic cigarettes (also called e-cigarettes) are often perceived by youth as being less harmful than tobacco cigarettes. E-cigarettes are battery-operated devices designed to deliver nicotine, flavorings, and other chemicals to users in vapor form instead of smoke, and are designed to simulate the act of tobacco smoking. The surge in e-cigarette use by middle and high school students is cause for concern since nicotine is highly addictive and is known to have harmful effects on the adolescent brain. The wide array of e-cigarette cartridge flavors (such as coffee, mint, candy, and fruit flavors) is another area of concern, as the candy and fruit flavors make them particularly appealing to young people.

Wisconsin Wins (WI Wins) was launched in the spring of 2002 as part of a comprehensive approach to prevent youth access to tobacco. The WI Wins program is a science-based, state-level initiative designed to decrease youth access to tobacco products. The program uses positive reinforcement to reduce illegal tobacco sales to minors. It congratulates local clerks who do not sell tobacco to youth, while educating those who would. This approach creates community pride and provides youth with an opportunity to make a difference in their community.

"The Wisconsin Wins program not only works to keep tobacco out of minor's hands, but also congratulates retailers that make the decision to not sell. Regular compliance checks are important to make sure that our youth are not easily accessing a product that can addict them and cause negative health effects," said Deb Tackmann, WI Wins Coordinator for Eau Claire County.

In Wisconsin, 6.4% of retailers currently sell tobacco products to minors. In Eau Claire County that number was 9.7% in 2014. Conducting compliance checks is a best practice strategy used to continue to decrease the number of sales in Eau Claire County. The Eau Claire City-County Health Department contracts with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services to conduct investigations through the Wisconsin Wins Program. Participating youth perform regular checks through Wisconsin Wins to make sure tobacco retailers aren't selling tobacco products to minors. Retailers that pass their checks are thanked by the Eau Claire County Health Department representatives and participating youth, while retailers that sell to youth are provided with resources, such as Smokecheck.org, to help them avoid future illegal sales and potential fines.

For more on local tobacco prevention and control efforts, contact Rachael Manning, Health Educator, (P) 715-839-5091.